

THE BA‘AL OPERATING SYSTEM

*Relational Authority, Theological Convergence,
and the Pan-Semitic Sovereignty Grammar*



A Study in Three Parts

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PART I

Ba'al as Relational Authority

*Distributional Evidence from the Ebla Palace G Archive
and the Pre-Literate Bull Cult of the Eastern Mediterranean*

Abstract

This paper examines the Semitic root *b-ʿl* (conventionally vocalized *baʿal*) as attested in the 24th-century BCE Ebla Palace G archive, the earliest substantial cuneiform corpus from Syria. Rather than projecting later meanings (“lord,” “god”) backward onto the earliest tokens, we employ a distributional-semantic methodology: inferring meaning from syntactic frames, collocational patterns, and referent classes as they appear in the onomastic record. Our analysis demonstrates that *baʿal* in Eblaite personal names functions as a relational noun of possession and authority—“possessor/controller”—rather than as a feudal title or a fixed divine name. The root predicates authority over built structures, landscapes, theriomorphic divine figures, and numinous entities in identical syntactic frames, suggesting a unified semantic core of supreme controlling authority. We further contextualize this textual evidence within the archaeological record of bull-centered cult practice in the eastern Mediterranean, spanning from Göbekli Tepe (c. 9500 BCE) through Çatalhöyük (c. 7500–5600 BCE) and the Chalcolithic southern Levant (c. 4500–3600 BCE). We argue that *baʿal* as a theological concept predates writing, and that the Ebla scribes were encoding an inherited pre-literate tradition of supreme divine authority rather than innovating a new one. The implications of this reading for later Levantine religious history, including the relationship between Baʿal worship and Yahwistic traditions, are noted but reserved for future treatment.

Chapter 1. Introduction

The Semitic root *b-ʿl* has been conventionally translated as “lord” or “master” across standard reference grammars and lexica of Semitic languages. In biblical scholarship and popular reception alike, “Baʿal” is typically understood as the name or title of a Canaanite storm deity, known primarily from the Late Bronze Age Ugaritic Baal Cycle (c. 1300–1100 BCE) and from the polemical denunciations of the Hebrew prophets. This conventional picture, however, begins in medias res. It takes as its starting point a literary and theological tradition already centuries old by the time the Ugaritic scribes committed it to alphabetic cuneiform, and it reads that tradition through the lens of the Yahwistic polemic that sought to displace it.

The discovery of the Ebla archive at Tell Mardikh in Syria, excavated from 1974 onward by the Italian Archaeological Mission under Paolo Matthiae, fundamentally altered the evidentiary landscape.¹ Within the collapsed rooms of Royal Palace G, excavators recovered approximately

¹Erica Scarpa, “The Archives of Ebla: A Primer,” *The International Association for Assyriology*, Mar Shiprim, 2024.

20,000 cuneiform tablets datable to the 24th century BCE—the oldest substantial archive from Syria and among the earliest significant evidence for any Semitic language in written form.² These tablets, written in both Sumerian and the local Semitic language now called Eblaite, provide a window into a religious and linguistic world at least a millennium older than the Ugaritic corpus.

The present paper advances two interconnected claims. First, we argue on distributional-semantic grounds that *ba'al* in the Ebla Palace G onomastic corpus functions not as a divine name or feudal title but as a relational noun of supreme possessive authority—a term meaning “possessor/controller” that can predicate dominion over entities ranging from built structures to divine figures. Second, we argue that this textual evidence, when situated within the archaeological record of continuous bull-centered cult practice across the eastern Mediterranean from the 10th through the 3rd millennium BCE, supports the hypothesis that *ba'al* encodes a theological concept of supreme divine authority that predates literacy in the Semitic world.

We make no downstream claims about the moral standing, legitimacy, or practices of any living religious community. This inquiry concerns the deep historical root of a theological concept, not the traditions that subsequently evolved from it across millennia.

Chapter 2. Methodology: Distributional Semantics Applied to Archaic Onomastics

The methodological core of this paper is distributional rather than translational. Where conventional approaches to *ba'al* begin from a gloss (“lord”) and project it backward, we treat the root as a distributional object: a morpheme whose meaning is to be inferred from (a) the syntactic frames it occupies, (b) the immediate collocates it binds to, and (c) the referent classes of its subjects and objects.³ This approach is standard in modern corpus linguistics and has the advantage of foregrounding what the scribes actually did with the morpheme, rather than what later interpreters assumed it meant.

The primary data source is the Ebla prosopographic corpus: the systematically catalogued personal names from the Palace G archive, as published and organized in the ARET (Archivi Reali di Ebla—Testi) and MEE (Materiali Epigrafici di Ebla) series, and in the prosopographic

²Erica Scarpa, “The Archives of Ebla: A Primer,” *The International Association for Assyriology*, Mar Shiprim, 2024.

³Prosopography of Ebla, compiled under Alfonso Archi, Amalia Catagnoli, and Paolo Fronzaroli. Palace G archival corpus, Tell Mardikh.

compilations associated with Alfonso Archi, Amalia Catagnoli, and Paolo Fronzaroli.⁴⁵ Eblaite scribal practice employed Sumerograms (the logographic sign BAD for *ba'al*) alongside mixed phonetic-logographic writing; vocalization is therefore reconstructed. Our semantic inferences accordingly rely more on structural distribution—what frames the sign occupies, what other signs surround it—than on reconstructed vowel patterns.⁶

A critical methodological assumption must be stated explicitly: personal names in ancient Semitic cultures are not arbitrary labels. They are, in the technical sense, semantic propositions—compressed nominal sentences or predicative expressions that encode theological, familial, or evaluative content. A name like “Fortress is *ba'al*” is not merely a label; it is a claim about the nature of authority. The onomastic corpus therefore functions as a laboratory of semantic frames, and its evidence bears directly on the question of what *ba'al* meant to the community that produced these names.⁷

Chapter 3. Pre-Literate Evidence: The Bull Cult of the Eastern Mediterranean

3.1 Göbekli Tepe (c. 9500–8000 BCE)

The oldest monumental evidence for organized cult practice in the Near East comes from Göbekli Tepe in southeastern Turkey, a Pre-Pottery Neolithic site whose earliest structures date to approximately 9500 BCE.⁸ The site consists of large circular enclosures containing monolithic limestone pillars up to four meters in height, arranged around even larger central pillars. Many of these pillars are decorated with carved reliefs of animals, including bulls shown with heads lowered in aggressive posture, as well as stylized anthropomorphic features—arms, hands, and clothing—suggesting that the pillars themselves represent humanlike beings of superhuman scale.⁹ The labor required to quarry, transport, and erect these pillars has been estimated at a

⁴⁵Prosopography of Ebla, compiled under Alfonso Archi, Amalia Catagnoli, and Paolo Fronzaroli. Palace G archival corpus, Tell Mardikh.

⁵Amalia Catagnoli, *La grammatica della lingua di Ebla*, Quaderni di Semitistica 29 (Firenze: Università di Firenze, 2012).

⁶Michael P. Streck, “Eblaite and Old Akkadian,” in *A Companion to Ancient Near Eastern Languages*, ed. Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee (Hoboken: Wiley, 2020).

⁷Joseph M. Pagan, *A Morphological and Lexical Study of Personal Names in the Ebla Texts*, ARES 3 (Rome: Università degli Studi di Roma ‘La Sapienza,’ 1998).

⁸Klaus Schmidt, *Göbekli Tepe: A Stone Age Sanctuary in South-Eastern Anatolia* (Berlin: ex oriente, 2012).

⁹Olivier Dietrich and Jens Notroff, “A Sanctuary, or so Fair a House? In Defense of an Archaeology of Cult at Pre-Pottery Neolithic Göbekli Tepe,” in *Defining the Sacred: Approaches to the Archaeology of Religion in the Near East*, ed. N. Laneri (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 75–89.

minimum of 500 workers, implying organized religious leadership coordinating collective effort before the advent of agriculture.¹⁰

Bucrania—carved bull heads or bull-skull motifs—appear on pillars and at portal entrances throughout the site. Animal bones recovered from the enclosures, numbering in the tens of thousands, confirm that numerous species depicted on the pillars were slaughtered and presumably consumed at the site in sacrificial contexts.¹¹ While the precise theological content of Göbekli Tepe's religion cannot be recovered without textual evidence, the structural facts are clear: organized, large-scale cult practice featuring prominent bovine symbolism existed in Upper Mesopotamia at least seven millennia before writing.

3.2 Çatalhöyük (c. 7500–5600 BCE)

Çatalhöyük, a large Neolithic and Chalcolithic settlement on the Konya Plain of south-central Turkey, provides the most extensive evidence for domestic-scale bull cult in the pre-literate Near East. Excavations by James Mellaart (1961–1965) and subsequently by Ian Hodder (1993–2018) revealed that many houses contained plastered bull skulls (bucrania) set into walls and platforms, often painted with ochre red.¹²¹³ These installations were the most prominent form of symbolic decoration at the site. Analysis of faunal remains shows that wild bulls (aurochs) constituted the primary meat consumed by the inhabitants, and the animals represented in art were overwhelmingly wild rather than domesticated.¹⁴

Alfonso Archi, the chief epigrapher of the Ebla tablet corpus and a leading authority on both the archaeological and textual evidence, has drawn a direct interpretive line from the Çatalhöyük bull to later divine iconography: “the bull represented the Storm-god (a concept which reached the Classical period), the stag the god of the wild fauna, and female figurines symbolized the Mother-goddess.”¹⁵ This assessment is significant precisely because it comes from a scholar who has spent decades working within the Ebla corpus and who therefore brings both archaeological and philological authority to the question of continuity between pre-literate cult and later Semitic theology.

¹⁰Klaus Schmidt, *Göbekli Tepe: A Stone Age Sanctuary in South-Eastern Anatolia* (Berlin: ex oriente, 2012).

¹¹Olivier Dietrich and Jens Notroff, "A Sanctuary, or so Fair a House?," 75–89.

¹²James Mellaart, *Çatal Höyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967).

¹³Smarthistory, "Çatalhöyük," published in collaboration with the Çatalhöyük Research Project.

¹⁴Smarthistory, "Çatalhöyük," published in collaboration with the Çatalhöyük Research Project.

¹⁵Alfonso Archi, "Shaping Gods: from Göbekli Tepe to Kaneš, Hattuşa, and Beyond," published in Firenze University Press, 2023.

3.3 The Chalcolithic Southern Levant (c. 4500–3600 BCE)

The Chalcolithic period of the southern Levant provides the temporal bridge between the deep Neolithic sites and the Ebla texts. Scholarship on this period characterizes Chalcolithic religion as fundamentally concerned with life cycles, death, and regeneration.¹⁶ Research on Neolithic and Chalcolithic bovine figurines from the central and southern Levant has identified a coherent symbolic structure linking bulls, sun, fire, ash, purification, fertility, and rebirth—a complex that maps with notable precision onto the storm-god/fertility-controller profile later associated with *ba'al* in the textual record.¹⁷

Bull figurines are among the most common finds on archaeological sites across the Levant from this period forward. The continuity of bovine symbolism in ritual contexts—from bucrania installations at Çatalhöyük, through Chalcolithic figurine assemblages, to the bronze bull offerings recovered from Ebla's temple deposits—constitutes an unbroken chain of material evidence spanning at least five millennia before the Ebla archive was written.

3.4 Methodological Constraints on Pre-Literate Evidence

A hard methodological limit must be acknowledged. The archaeological record can document the presence of bull-centered cult practice, bovine symbolism in ritual contexts, and the association of these with storm/fertility themes. What it cannot do is tell us what pre-literate communities called the divine figure at the center of this cult. The specific phonological form *b-l* is Semitic, and Semitic languages as a recoverable linguistic family cannot be traced with confidence to the periods represented by Göbekli Tepe or Çatalhöyük. We therefore frame our claim precisely: the concept of a supreme divine authority associated with the bull, with storm/fertility control, and with dominion over life-death cycles is archaeologically attested across the eastern Mediterranean for millennia before writing. When *ba'al* appears in the Ebla texts already functioning as a universal authority term governing these same domains, the most parsimonious inference is one of continuity rather than innovation.

¹⁶David Ilan, "Deconstructing and Recomposing the Narrative of Spiritual Life in the Chalcolithic of the Southern Levant (4500–3600 B.C.E.)," *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 21 (2011).

¹⁷Research on Neolithic clay bovine figurines in the Central and Southern Levant, in *Acts of Neolithic Ritualization Associated with Levantine Bovine Figurines*, 2018.

Chapter 4. The Ebla Palace G Archive: Ba'al in the Earliest Semitic Texts

4.1 The Archive and Its Context

The cuneiform tablets of Palace G at Tell Mardikh (ancient Ebla) constitute the earliest substantial written archive from Syria, datable to the 24th century BCE.¹⁸ The archive encompasses administrative, economic, lexical, literary, diplomatic, and ritual texts, written in a cuneiform script adapted from Sumerian conventions to express the local Semitic language, Eblaite. The Ebla Digital Archives project, based at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, provides systematic digital access to the corpus.¹⁹ The population of Ebla during this period is estimated at approximately 40,000 in the capital, with over 200,000 in the broader kingdom, making it one of the major urban centers of the 3rd-millennium Near East.

Ebla was a deeply religious polity. The administrative texts systematically catalogue offerings—both bloody (sheep, goats) and unbloody (bread, beer, oil)—presented to deities by the king, the royal family, and private citizens throughout the year.²⁰ Four tablets published by Giovanni Pettinato list monthly offerings of sheep to various deities and specify the locations where these offerings were presented, identifying at least eight distinct sacred edifices within the city.²² The offering lists mention approximately 40 deities receiving sacrifices, and the four city gates were named after the gods Dagan, Hadda, Rasap, and Utu.

4.2 The Eblaite Pantheon and Ba'al's Position

The Eblaite pantheon was primarily Semitic, headed by Dagan, and included deities familiar from later West Semitic sources: Ishtar, Hadad (Hadda), Rashap (Resheph), Kamish, the sun goddess Shipish, and the storm god Adad. It also included gods unknown outside Ebla, notably the divine pair Kura and Barama, who served as protective deities of the Eblaite kingdom.²³ The Sumerian god Nergal, lord of the underworld, was equated with Rashap in the Eblaite bilingual

¹⁸Erica Scarpa, "The Archives of Ebla: A Primer," 2024.

¹⁹Ebla Digital Archives (EbDA), Ca' Foscari University of Venice in collaboration with CNR-ISMed. Available at: <http://ebda.cnr.it/>

²⁰Giovanni Pettinato, "Culto ufficiale ad Ebla durante il regno di Ibbi-Sipiš," *Oriens Antiquus* XVIII (1979): 85–215.

²¹Mitchell Dahood, "The Temple and Other Sacred Places in the Ebla Tablets," in *The Temple in Antiquity*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984).

²²Mitchell Dahood, "The Temple and Other Sacred Places in the Ebla Tablets," in *The Temple in Antiquity*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984).

²³F. Pomponio and P. Xella, *Les dieux d'Ebla*, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 245 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1997).

vocabulary, indicating that the Eblaïtes maintained a systematic theological apparatus for mapping their own deities onto the Sumerian pantheon.

Within this system, *ba'al* (written with the Sumerogram BAD) does not appear as a standalone deity receiving independent cult offerings in the way that Dagan, Kura, or Rashap do. Instead, it appears pervasively in the onomastic corpus—in personal names—where it functions as a relational element expressing authority and possession. This distributional fact is the foundation of our semantic analysis.

4.3 Worship Practices: The Storm God and the Bull

A critical piece of evidence connecting the Ebla textual record to the pre-literate bull cult comes from Archi's study of the weather god Hadda at Aleppo. During the 24th century BCE, Aleppo served as a major cult center for Hadda, administered by an overseer under Ebla's political control. The king and his family participated regularly in the rites. Archi documents that "twice a year, a renewal rite required the replacement of his mace and pair of bull's horns. Besides the mace, a chariot and two bulls with human faces were attributed to this god, an iconography which lasted into subsequent centuries."²⁴

This description is directly significant for three reasons. First, the storm god's ritual apparatus includes bull's horns—the same ritual objects (bucrania) that characterize cult practice from Çatalhöyük onward. Second, the god is attended by human-faced bulls (Ditānu), which are precisely the bovine-divine figures that appear in the Ebla *ba'al* onomastic corpus (the name Ba'al-šu-Ditānu, "Human-faced-bull is his *ba'al*"). Third, the iconography is explicitly described as persisting into later centuries, establishing documented continuity between Eblaite and later Levantine cult practice.

Archaeological evidence from Ebla's temples further corroborates this picture. Excavation of a temple favissa (ritual deposit pit) yielded artifacts including carnelian lions, bronze bulls, and bronze snakes—with the bronze bulls constituting direct material evidence of bovine-divine cult objects in 24th-century Ebla. The Eblaite scapegoat ritual, in which a goat wearing a silver bracelet was sent to the mountain to purify the temple, represents the oldest known instance of a rite structurally identical to the biblical ceremony described in Leviticus, predating the biblical text by approximately 1,500 years.²⁵

²⁴Alfonso Archi, "Hadda of Ḫalab and His Temple in the Ebla Period," *IRAQ* 72 (2010): 3–17.

²⁵Mitchell Dahood, "The Temple and Other Sacred Places in the Ebla Tablets."

Both priests and priestesses at Ebla were “anointed,” and itinerant prophets (*nobiutum*, a term linguistically cognate with Hebrew *nabi*, “prophet”) moved from city to city delivering divine messages.²⁶ Six months of the New Calendar were named after festivals of specific gods, and two additional religious rituals are documented: one resembling a festival of tabernacles and another resembling a holocaust offering.

Chapter 5. Distributional Analysis: Ba'al as Relational Authority in the Onomastic Corpus

5.1 Token Evidence: Ba'al in Eblaite Personal Names

The following tokens are drawn from the Ebla prosopographic corpus (Palace G, Tell Mardikh, 24th century BCE) as published in the ARET/MEE series and the associated prosopographic compilations.²⁷²⁸ Each represents a personal name in which *ba'al* (written BAD) occupies a defined syntactic position. We present the names, their syntactic frames, their nearest collocates, and minimal contextual glosses.

Token	Syntactic Frame	Nearest Collocates	Contextual Gloss
<i>Ba'al-Dēr-u</i>	Nominal sentence: [X] is ba'al	Dēr “fortress”	“Fortress is ba'al”
<i>Ba'al-Bayt-u</i>	Nominal sentence: [X] is ba'al	Bayt “house”	“House is ba'al”
<i>Ba'al-šu-Bayt-u</i>	Possessive + nominal	Bayt “house”	“House is his ba'al”
<i>Ba'al-šu-Šadû</i>	Possessive + nominal	Šadû “mountain”	“Mountain is his ba'al”
<i>Ba'l-a-ni</i>	Relational (“over me”)	Pronominal	“(DN) is ba'al over me”
<i>Ba'al-šu-Ba'al</i>	Possessive recursion	ba'al ... ba'al	“ba'al is his ba'al”
<i>Ba'al-šu-Ditānu</i>	Possessive + named figure	Ditānu “Human-faced bull”	“Human-faced bull is his ba'al”
<i>Ba'l-a-Mutu</i>	Nominal sentence	Mutu (death/deity)	“Mutu is ba'al”
<i>Ba'l-u</i>	Standalone noun	—	“ba'al” as simplex PN
<i>Ba'l-u-ma</i>	Intensified predicate	Particle -ma (“truly”)	“Truly a ba'al”

Table 1: Diagnostic *ba'al* tokens from the Ebla Palace G onomastic corpus

5.2 Distributional Findings

The token evidence yields several distributional findings of direct relevance to the semantic question.

²⁶Mitchell Dahood, “The Temple and Other Sacred Places in the Ebla Tablets.”

²⁷Prosopography of Ebla, compiled under Alfonso Archi, Amalia Catagnoli, and Paolo Fronzaroli.

²⁸Joseph M. Pagan, *A Morphological and Lexical Study of Personal Names in the Ebla Texts*, ARES 3 (1998).

Finding 1: Non-human predication. The token set includes names in which *ba'al* is predicated of built structures (“house,” “fortress”), landscape features (“mountain”), and a theriomorphic divine figure (“Human-faced bull”). These collocates are not compatible with a semantics of human social rank. A house is not a “lord” in any socially bounded sense; nor is a mountain. The frames require a more abstract reading: *ba'al* as “controlling authority” or “possessing power.”

Finding 2: Possessive recursion. The token Ba'al-šu-Ba'al (“*ba'al* is his *ba'al*”) demonstrates that the term can predicate authority over itself—a construction that only makes sense if *ba'al* denotes an abstract relational property (authority, control) rather than a concrete social position. This is analogous to English constructions like “the power behind the power” and confirms that the semantic nucleus is relational, not referential.

Finding 3: Consistency of syntactic frame across ontological categories. The same nominal-sentence frame (“X is *ba'al*”) is used with subjects drawn from radically different ontological categories: physical structures, natural features, bovine-divine figures, and numinous entities (Mutu, associated with the concept of death). If *ba'al* carried different meanings for different referent classes, the scribal tradition would be using identical grammar to express fundamentally different propositions—an incoherence unlikely in a sophisticated administrative culture. The more parsimonious reading is that *ba'al* carries a single consistent meaning—supreme possessive authority—across all frames, with the variation residing in the domain governed rather than in the meaning of the term itself.

Finding 4: Productive diversity of frame types. Within the *ba'al* dossier alone, we observe at minimum four distinct syntactic frame types: (i) nominal sentences (X-is-*ba'al*), (ii) possessive constructions (*ba'al*-šu-X), (iii) possessive recursion (*ba'al*-šu-*ba'al*), and (iv) simplex nominal (*ba'al* as a standalone personal name). This diversity indicates that *ba'al* is not a frozen theophoric element but a productive relational noun in the onomastic grammar—speakers could think with it, combine it freely, and apply it across domains.²⁹

5.3 The Consistency Argument

The distributional evidence compels a choice. If *ba'al* is merely a common noun meaning “possessor” in a mundane property sense, then constructions like “House is possessor” and “Mountain is possessor” require semantically bizarre readings in which inanimate objects exercise human-like ownership. If, alternatively, *ba'al* is simply the name of one god among many, then its grammatical behavior—predicating possession over other divine figures (Mutu,

²⁹Joseph M. Pagan, *A Morphological and Lexical Study of Personal Names in the Ebla Texts*, ARES 3 (1998).

Ditānu)—is anomalous, since gods in Semitic pantheons typically receive offerings and occupy cult spaces rather than grammatically possessing other gods.

The reading that resolves both anomalies simultaneously is that *ba'al* denotes supreme controlling authority as a relational concept—the divine possessor to whom all domains belong. Under this reading, “House is *ba'al*’s” and “Mountain is *ba'al*’s” and “Mutu is *ba'al*’s” all express the same grammatical and theological proposition: these domains belong to the supreme possessor. The grammar is consistent; the theology is consistent; the variation is in the domain attributed to the authority, not in the nature of the authority itself. This parallels the grammar of later monotheistic traditions in which subsidiary divine figures are described possessively as belonging to a supreme deity (e.g., “God’s angels”), without the possessive grammar requiring explanation or apology.

Chapter 6. Synthesis: Ba'al as Pre-Literate Supreme Divine Concept

The convergence of archaeological and textual evidence supports the following synthetic claim: *ba'al* as a theological concept—the supreme possessor/controller associated with storm power, fertility, and dominion over the domains of life and death—has deep pre-literate roots in the eastern Mediterranean. The Ebla scribes of the 24th century BCE were encoding an inherited tradition, not innovating a new one.

The evidence chain can be summarized as follows: (1) From at least the 10th millennium BCE (Göbekli Tepe), organized cult practice featuring prominent bovine symbolism, bucrania installations, and animal sacrifice is archaeologically documented in Upper Mesopotamia.³⁰³¹ (2) From the 8th millennium BCE (Çatalhöyük), domestic-scale bull cult with plastered bucrania, ochre-painted bull skulls, and wall installations is pervasive across a large Neolithic settlement, and a leading epigrapher of the Ebla corpus identifies the bull at this site with the Storm-god concept.³²³³ (3) Through the Chalcolithic period (c. 4500–3600 BCE), a coherent symbolic structure linking bulls, fire, purification, fertility, and rebirth is documented in the southern Levant.³⁴³⁵ (4) In the 24th century BCE, when Semitic-speaking scribes at Ebla first commit their theology to writing, *ba'al* already functions as a fully productive relational authority noun

³⁰Klaus Schmidt, *Göbekli Tepe: A Stone Age Sanctuary in South-Eastern Anatolia* (Berlin: ex oriente, 2012).

³¹Olivier Dietrich and Jens Notroff, "A Sanctuary, or so Fair a House?," 75–89.

³²James Mellaart, *Çatal Höyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967).

³³Alfonso Archi, "Shaping Gods: from Göbekli Tepe to Kaneš, Hattuşa, and Beyond," Firenze University Press, 2023.

³⁴David Ilan, "Deconstructing and Recomposing the Narrative of Spiritual Life in the Chalcolithic of the Southern Levant," 2011.

³⁵Research on Neolithic clay bovine figurines, *Acts of Neolithic Ritualization*, 2018.

governing divine domains including the human-faced bull, and the contemporary storm-god cult at Aleppo involves biannual renewal of bull's horns as central ritual apparatus.³⁶³⁷

The most parsimonious reading of this evidence is that *ba'al* names—in the Semitic linguistic tradition—a pre-existing concept of supreme divine authority that the archaeological record documents independently. The level of productive grammatical integration visible in the Ebla onomastic corpus (four distinct frame types, consistent behavior across ontological categories, possessive recursion) is not characteristic of a recently coined term. It implies generations of prior oral usage in which *ba'al* as “the possessor of all domains” was already the default theological frame before anyone pressed a stylus into clay.

Chapter 7. Implications and Directions for Future Research

If the analysis presented here is correct, it reframes the later history of Ba'al worship across the Levant. The Ba'al veneration documented at Ugarit (13th–12th centuries BCE), in Phoenicia, at Carthage, and in the persistent cult that the Hebrew prophets spent centuries denouncing would not represent a regional storm-god cult that arose independently in the Late Bronze Age. It would represent the downstream continuation of the oldest continuous theological tradition in the Semitic world—one that was already ancient when the Ebla scribes first wrote it down.

The relationship between *ba'al* and Yahweh is a question that arises naturally from this evidence but that we reserve for separate treatment. The shared storm-god iconography, parallel epithets, the syncretic character of early Israelite religion, and the intensity of the prophetic polemic against Ba'al worship all suggest that the relationship between these two divine concepts is more complex and more deeply rooted than conventional treatments acknowledge.³⁸ The present paper establishes the evidentiary foundation—the pre-literate depth and supreme-authority semantics of *ba'al*—upon which that inquiry can proceed.

We note once more, as a matter of scholarly principle, that this line of inquiry concerns the deep historical past and has no implications for the moral standing, legitimacy, or value of any living religious community. Whatever happened at the root does not propagate moral liability forward through time.

³⁶Alfonso Archi, "Hadda of Ḫalab and His Temple in the Ebla Period," *IRAQ* 72 (2010): 3–17.

³⁷Prosopography of Ebla, compiled under Alfonso Archi, Amalia Catagnoli, and Paolo Fronzaroli.

³⁸Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

PART II

Ba'al and Yahweh

Convergent Evidence for a Shared Theological Root

Abstract

Part I of this study established that the Semitic root *b-ʿl* functions in the earliest attested texts (Ebla Palace G, 24th century BCE) as a relational noun of supreme possessive authority, and that this semantic profile is continuous with a pre-literate bull-centered divine cult archaeologically documented across the eastern Mediterranean from the 10th millennium BCE onward. The present paper (Part II) extends the analysis to the relationship between Baʿal and Yahweh. We examine four independent lines of evidence: (1) the storm-theophany language shared between the Ugaritic Baal Cycle and biblical descriptions of Yahweh, with particular attention to Psalm 29; (2) the Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscriptions (late 9th century BCE), which place Yahweh, El, and Baʿal in the same cultic context and pair Yahweh with Asherah; (3) the explicit Baʿal-Yahweh conflation addressed in the prophetic literature, particularly Hosea 2:16; and (4) the continuity of bovine divine iconography from the pre-literate bull cult through the golden calf narratives. We argue that the convergence of these evidence lines is most parsimoniously explained by a shared theological root: Yahweh inherited the storm-theophany package, the divine-authority semantics, and the cultic infrastructure of the Baʿal tradition, and the prophetic movement's project was to separate what had originally been unified. No claims are made regarding the legitimacy, moral standing, or practices of any living religious community.

Chapter 8. From Shared Semantics to Shared Theology

Part I of this study demonstrated that *baʿal* in the Ebla onomastic corpus functions as a relational noun of supreme possessive authority—a term that predicates dominion over domains ranging from built structures to divine figures in identical syntactic frames. We argued that this semantic profile, combined with the archaeological evidence of continuous bull-centered cult practice from Göbekli Tepe through Çatalhöyük through the Chalcolithic Levant, supports the hypothesis that *baʿal* encodes a pre-literate theological concept of supreme divine authority.

The present paper asks the next question: what is the relationship between this Baʿal tradition and Yahweh, the god of Israel? The conventional scholarly framework, articulated most comprehensively by Mark S. Smith, holds that early Israelite religion was deeply syncretic, that Yahweh absorbed attributes from both El (the head of the Canaanite pantheon) and Baʿal (the storm god), and that the development of Israelite monotheism involved a gradual, contested process of differentiation in which Baʿal's attributes were claimed for Yahweh while Baʿal

himself was demonized as the Other.³⁹⁴⁰ Our analysis supports this framework but pushes its implications further: if *ba'al* was not merely one god among many but the foundational concept of supreme divine authority in the Semitic world—as the Ebla evidence suggests—then Yahweh's inheritance of Ba'al's attributes is not syncretism in the conventional sense. It is the continuation, under a new name, of the oldest theological tradition in the region.

We organize the evidence into four independent lines, each drawing on different source types (literary, epigraphic, prophetic, iconographic), and assess their convergence.

Chapter 9. The Storm Theophany: Psalm 29 and the Voice of Ba'al

9.1 The Ugaritic Background

In the Ugaritic Baal Cycle (KTU 1.1–1.6, c. 1300–1100 BCE), Ba'al's divine identity is constituted by his control over the storm: rain is his gift, thunder is his voice, lightning is his weapon, and the fertility of the earth depends on his presence. The poetic formulae are highly stable: “rain of Ba'al,” “voice in the clouds,” “lightning to the earth.” Ba'al's kingship is established through combat with Yam (Sea) and contested by Mot (Death); his enthronement is celebrated by the divine assembly.⁴¹ As established in Part I, these collocations encode Ba'al not as a generic “lord” but as the possessor/controller of a specific meteorological-fertility domain.

9.2 Psalm 29: The Transferred Storm Hymn

Psalm 29 is, by broad scholarly consensus, the biblical text most closely connected to the Ugaritic Ba'al tradition. In 1935, H. L. Ginsberg identified multiple Canaanite elements in the psalm: the address to the “sons of gods” (*benē 'ēlīm*), corresponding to the Ugaritic divine assembly; the glorification of the “voice of Yahweh” as thunder, paralleling the praises of Ba'al; and geographical references to Lebanon, Sirion (Mount Hermon), and Kadesh—all located in Syria, not in Israel.⁴² Theodor Gaster subsequently argued that the psalm was originally

³⁹Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁴⁰Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴¹Mark S. Smith and Wayne Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle: Volume 2* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

⁴²H. L. Ginsberg, “A Phoenician Hymn in the Psalter,” in *Atti del XIX Congresso Internazionale degli Orientalisti* (Rome, 1935), 472–476.

Canaanite and had been adapted for Israelite use by the substitution of Yahweh's name for Ba'al's.⁴³

The structural parallels are extensive. The psalm describes Yahweh's "voice" (*qōl yhw̄h*) seven times, in contexts of thunder over waters, shattering of cedars, flames of fire, and shaking of the wilderness. Yahweh is enthroned over the cosmic flood (*mabbūl*). John Day has summarized: Yahweh's theophany in the thunderstorm, his exaltation in the divine assembly, and his enthronement as king over the cosmic sea are all paralleled in the Ba'al mythology of the Ugaritic texts.⁴⁴ F. M. Cross identified the psalm's structure as following a classic sequence: address to the divine council, theophany of the storm god, convulsions of nature, and appearance of the god as victor and king enthroned in his temple.⁴⁵

Aloysius Fitzgerald stated directly that the presentation of Ba'al as the god of the rainstorm found in the Ugaritic texts has been used by Israelite poets in speaking of Yahweh, and that such connections can be identified with relative ease.⁴⁶ More recent work by Jouko Töyräänvuori has proposed a triangulating methodology, reading Psalm 29 against both the Baal Cycle (KTU 1.4 VII 25–52) and the Ugaritic hymn on the enthronement of Ba'al (KTU 1.101), and comparing all three with iconographic depictions of the storm god from Syrian cylinder seals.⁴⁷

9.3 Analytical Implications

The scholarly debate concerns whether Psalm 29 was directly adapted from a Ba'al hymn or deliberately composed using Canaanite poetic conventions to assert Yahweh's superiority. For our purposes, this distinction is secondary. Both positions concede the same underlying fact: the theological language used to describe Yahweh's storm theophany is structurally identical to the language used to describe Ba'al's. The "voice in the clouds," the sevenfold thunder, the enthronement over the cosmic waters—these are Ba'al's attributes, attested in the Ugaritic corpus, now predicated of Yahweh.

Under the framework established in Part I, this is not borrowing in the conventional sense. If *ba'al* was the original relational-authority concept denoting the supreme divine possessor/controller of the storm-fertility domain, then Psalm 29 documents the same theological

⁴³Theodor H. Gaster, "Psalm 29," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, 37, no. 1 (1946): 55–65.

⁴⁴John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

⁴⁵F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

⁴⁶Aloysius Fitzgerald, "A Note on Psalm 29," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 215 (1974): 61–63.

⁴⁷Jouko Töyräänvuori, "Psalm 29 and Methodological Triangulation," *Biblische Notizen* (2020).

content under a different name. The storm theophany was not Ba'al's to "lend" to Yahweh; it was the property of the supreme divine concept that both names reference. What changed was the label, not the theology.

Chapter 10. Kuntillet 'Ajrud: Yahweh, Ba'al, and El in a Single Cultic Context

10.1 The Site and Its Inscriptions

Kuntillet 'Ajrud is an Iron Age II site in the northeastern Sinai desert, situated on a plateau overlooking the junction of major roads. Excavated by Ze'ev Meshel in 1975–76, the site functioned as a way-station or caravanserai for desert travelers.⁴⁸ The primary finds of religious significance are two large storage jars (pithoi) and plastered wall inscriptions, dated to the late 9th or early 8th century BCE. The inscriptions are written primarily in early Hebrew, with some in Phoenician script.⁴⁹

The inscriptions are religious in nature. They invoke Yahweh by two distinct local epithets—"Yahweh of Samaria" and "Yahweh of Teman" (Teman designating the southern region, possibly Edom)—a pattern of localized divine manifestation that parallels the earlier Eblaite practice of associating deities with specific cities and cult centers. Crucially, Ba'al and El also appear in a poetic text written in ink on one of the plaster walls.⁵⁰⁵¹ The co-presence of Yahweh, Ba'al, and El at a single Israelite religious site is a datum of first importance.

10.2 "Yahweh and His Asherah"

The most intensely debated inscriptions from the site are those containing the formula "I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his Asherah" (*brkt 'tkm lyhwh šmrn wl'šrth*). This formula appears in multiple inscriptions at the site.⁵²⁵³ The scholarly debate concerns whether "his Asherah" refers to the goddess Asherah (the consort of El in the Ugaritic pantheon), a cult object

⁴⁸Ze'ev Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Horvat Teiman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2012).

⁴⁹The Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions, dated to the late 9th century BCE. See Meshel 2012 and Blum, Erhard, "Kuntillet 'Ajrud 4.1: New Reconstructions and Readings," *Eretz-Israel* 34 (2021): 10–20.

⁵⁰The Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions. See Meshel 2012 and Blum 2021.

⁵¹Nadav Na'aman, "In Search of the Temples of YHWH of Samaria and YHWH of Teman," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 17, no. 1 (2017): 76–95.

⁵²Ze'ev Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Horvat Teiman)* (2012).

⁵³William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

associated with her worship, or a sacred precinct. The possessive pronoun (“his”) is unusual with divine names in biblical Hebrew, which has led some scholars to favor the cult-object interpretation.

For our analysis, the critical point is structural rather than lexical. Whether “asherah” here denotes the goddess or her cult symbol, the inscription places Yahweh within the same divine-relational framework that characterizes the broader Canaanite pantheon. In the Ugaritic system, Asherah (Athirat) is the consort of El, the father of the gods. If Yahweh “has” an Asherah—whether goddess or symbol—he is occupying the structural position of the supreme male deity within the Canaanite divine family. This is precisely the position that Ba'al, as the active storm-god successor to the more distant El, also occupies in the Ugaritic mythological texts.⁵⁴⁵⁵

10.3 Ba'al, El, and Yahweh as Co-Present or Interchangeable

The co-occurrence of Yahweh, El, and Ba'al at Kuntillet 'Ajrud admits two interpretations. The first is that three distinct deities were worshipped simultaneously at the site, reflecting Israelite polytheism. The second is that El and Ba'al functioned as epithets or titles for Yahweh—that is, the three names referenced a single divine figure under different aspects.⁵⁶⁵⁷

Our framework from Part I supports the second interpretation as more historically coherent. If *ba'al* was originally not a personal divine name but a relational-authority title (“the possessor/controller”), then its co-occurrence with Yahweh at an Israelite religious site does not require polytheism. It requires only that Yahweh was still being addressed by the old title—precisely the situation that the prophet Hosea would shortly denounce. The Kuntillet 'Ajrud evidence may thus represent the pre-reform state of Israelite religion, in which the supreme deity was addressed interchangeably as Yahweh, El (the ancient Semitic word for “god”), and Ba'al (the ancient Semitic title for “possessor/controller”).

Scholarship has noted that these inscriptions likely reflect common, traditional forms of private Israelite religion around 800 BCE, rather than elite theological innovation. Their core structure has been described as polytheistic with Yahweh and his Asherah as the dominant couple, with contemporary analogies in the territorial states of Ammon, Moab, and Edom.⁵⁸ If so, the later

⁵⁴Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 2nd ed. (2002).

⁵⁵John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (2000).

⁵⁶The Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions. See Meshel 2012 and Blum 2021.

⁵⁷G. Choi, “The Samaritan Syncretic Yahwism and the Religious Center of Kuntillet 'Ajrud,” in *From Sha'ar Hagolan to Shaaraim: Essays in Honor of Prof. Yosef Garfinkel* (Israel Exploration Society, 2016).

⁵⁸William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?* (2005).

Deuteronomistic reform that insisted on exclusive Yahwism was not correcting an aberration but suppressing a norm—dismantling a religious framework in which Yahweh and Ba'al were not opponents but aspects of a single theological inheritance.

Chapter 11. The Prophetic Rupture: Hosea 2:16 and the Deliberate Separation

11.1 The Text

The prophet Hosea, active in the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8th century BCE, provides the most explicit biblical evidence for the Ba'al-Yahweh conflation. In Hosea 2:16 (2:18 in some versifications), Yahweh declares through the prophet:

“In that day, declares Yahweh, you will call me ‘my husband’ (ishi) and no longer call me ‘my Ba'al’ (ba'ali).”

The Hebrew is unambiguous. The Israelites had been addressing Yahweh as *ba'ali*—“my Ba'al.” Hosea’s oracle demands that they stop. The key interpretive question is whether this reflects (a) confusion between Yahweh and a separate Ba'al deity, or (b) the use of the title *ba'al* (“my master/possessor”) as a mode of address for Yahweh himself.

11.2 Analysis Under the Present Framework

Both readings converge on the same structural fact: in pre-reform Israelite practice, the title *ba'al* was applied to the god the Israelites worshipped. This is not polemic against a foreign deity; it is an internal intervention within Yahwistic worship. Hosea is not telling the Israelites to stop worshipping a different god. He is telling them to stop using the old title for their own god.

Under the framework established in Part I, this makes perfect sense. If *ba'al* was the pre-literate Semitic title for the supreme divine possessor/controller, then early Israelites would naturally have applied it to their deity. It was the oldest and most deeply entrenched way of naming divine authority in the Semitic world. Hosea’s intervention represents the moment of deliberate theological surgery: the point at which the Yahwistic tradition consciously severs its nominal connection to the Ba'al tradition while retaining the theological content (storm theophany, sovereignty, fertility control) that the Ba'al title had always encoded.

Hosea 2:17 confirms the intention: “I will remove the names of the Ba'als from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more.” The project is not the elimination of a theology but

the elimination of a name—precisely the operation one would expect if the underlying theological content was to be preserved under a different label.⁵⁹

Chapter 12. The Golden Calf: Bovine Iconography and the Question of Mode

12.1 The Biblical Narrative

In Exodus 32:4, Aaron fashions a golden calf and declares: “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” The attribution is critical: the calf is not presented as a rival deity but as a representation of the god who performed the Exodus. The same formula is repeated when Jeroboam later establishes golden calves at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:28).

The interpretive question is whether the golden calf represents (a) apostasy to a foreign deity, or (b) the worship of Yahweh in bull form—that is, through the iconographic tradition of the Ba'al/El storm-god complex. The text of the Hebrew Bible can be understood to support the second reading: the calf is identified as the god who performed the defining act of Yahwistic theology (the Exodus), and the accompanying declaration uses the standard Yahwistic formula of divine self-identification.

12.2 Archaeological Context

The archaeological record strongly supports the reading of the golden calf as Yahweh-in-bull-form. Bull figurines are among the most common finds at Levantine archaeological sites. Both Ba'al and El were associated with the bull in Ugaritic texts, where it symbolized strength and fertility.⁶⁰ A 12th-century BCE bronze bull figurine was recovered from an open cultic site in the Samarian hills (the “Bull Site” at Dhahrat et-Tawileh), which the excavators initially associated with Ba'al/Hadad, but which the Israelite regional context and date imply was Israelite and associated with El or Yahweh.⁶¹

As established in Part I, the storm god Hadda at Aleppo—under Ebla's political control in the 24th century BCE—was worshipped with a mace and a pair of bull's horns, renewed biannually, and was attended by two human-faced bulls.⁶² The Ebla onomastic corpus includes the name

⁵⁹Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 2nd ed. (2002).

⁶⁰John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (2000).

⁶¹Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000–586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

⁶²Alfonso Archi, “Hadda of Ḫalab and His Temple in the Ebla Period,” *IRAQ* 72 (2010): 3–17.

Ba'al-šū-Ditānu (“Human-faced-bull is his *ba'al*”). The iconographic chain is therefore unbroken: the bull represents the supreme divine authority from the Neolithic bucrania through Ebla’s storm-god cult through the Iron Age Israelite bull figurines.

12.3 The Prohibition as Evidence of Continuity

The golden calf narrative, read in this light, documents not the worship of a wrong god but the worship of the right god in the old way. The theological content is Yahwistic: the god of the Exodus, the liberator of Israel. The mode of worship is Ba'alistic: the bull image, the high-place cult, the direct identification of divine power with animal potency. Moses’s destruction of the calf is therefore parallel to Hosea’s later demand to stop calling Yahweh “my Ba'al”: the content is retained, the mode is prohibited.

This reading explains an otherwise puzzling feature of the biblical text: why the cherubim in the Tabernacle and Temple are permitted—even commanded—while the calf is forbidden. A cherub is a divine attendant, not a representation of God himself. The bull, by contrast, is the divine figure—it is the supreme possessor/controller rendered in the iconographic vocabulary of the pre-literate bull cult. The prohibition targets the icon of the old theological system precisely because it threatens to collapse the distinction between Yahweh and Ba'al that the prophetic movement was laboring to establish.

Chapter 13. Chronological Anchor: The Abu Salabikh God List (c. 2600–2500 BCE)

Before assessing the convergence of these evidence lines, we note a chronological datum from Part I’s expanded evidence base. The Early Dynastic IIIa god list from Abu Salabikh (modern Dhi Qar, Iraq), catalogued in the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative, includes the entry {d}ba4-al—“Ba'al” with the divine determinative—as a theonym within a formal deity list.⁶³ This dates to approximately 2600–2500 BCE, one to two centuries before the Ebla Palace G archive. It demonstrates that *ba'al* was recognized as a divine name—not merely as a relational noun or title—in the formal scribal/lexical tradition of the mid-3rd millennium BCE.

This datum closes a gap in the Part I argument. There, we demonstrated that *ba'al* at Ebla functions as a relational authority term governing divine domains. The Abu Salabikh evidence shows that, in a contemporary but independent scribal tradition, *ba'al* was simultaneously

⁶³Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI). Abu Salabikh god list tablet P225958, Early Dynastic IIIa period (c. 2600–2500 BCE).

catalogued as a deity. The two functions are not contradictory; they are complementary. The relational-authority term was the divine name. To call something *ba'al* was to identify it as the supreme divine possessor, and the supreme divine possessor was, by the mid-3rd millennium, recognized as a god in his own right.

Chapter 14. Convergence Assessment: Four Lines, One Pattern

The four evidence lines presented in this paper are drawn from different source types (literary, epigraphic, prophetic, iconographic), different periods (Late Bronze Age through Iron Age II), and different scholarly traditions (Ugaritology, epigraphy, biblical studies, archaeology). Their convergence on a single pattern is therefore methodologically significant: it is not an artifact of a single dataset or a single interpretive tradition.

The pattern is as follows:

(1) Shared storm-theophany language. Psalm 29 predicates of Yahweh the same storm attributes—thunderous voice, lightning, enthronement over cosmic waters, sevenfold theophanic display—that the Ugaritic Baal Cycle predicates of Ba'al. The scholarly consensus, across decades of debate about the psalm's compositional history, is that this language derives from the Ba'al tradition.⁶⁴⁶⁵⁶⁶⁶⁷

(2) Co-presence in cultic contexts. At Kuntillet 'Ajrud (c. 800 BCE), Yahweh, El, and Ba'al appear at a single Israelite religious site. Yahweh is paired with Asherah in the same divine-relational structure that characterizes the Canaanite pantheon. The evidence suggests these names may have functioned as interchangeable designations for a single supreme deity in popular Israelite religion.⁶⁸⁶⁹⁷⁰

(3) Explicit conflation in the prophetic record. Hosea 2:16 documents that Israelites addressed Yahweh as "my Ba'al." The prophetic intervention demands the cessation of this practice—

⁶⁴H. L. Ginsberg, "A Phoenician Hymn in the Psalter," 472–476.

⁶⁵John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (2000).

⁶⁶F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (1973).

⁶⁷Jouko Töyräänvuori, "Psalm 29 and Methodological Triangulation," *Biblische Notizen* (2020).

⁶⁸Ze'ev Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Horvat Teiman)* (2012).

⁶⁹The Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions. See Meshel 2012 and Blum 2021.

⁷⁰William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?* (2005).

targeting the name, not the theological content. This is consistent with a project of re-labeling rather than theological replacement.⁷¹

(4) Iconographic continuity. The bull as divine icon is archaeologically continuous from Neolithic bucrania through Ebla's storm-god cult (where human-faced bulls attend Hadda/Ba'al) through Iron Age Israelite cultic contexts (the Bull Site figurine, the golden calf narratives). The golden calf is presented in the biblical text as a representation of the Exodus god—i.e., Yahweh—in bull form, and its prohibition targets the mode of worship, not the identity of the deity.⁷²⁷³

Each line alone is subject to alternative interpretation. Together, they constitute a convergent pattern that the conventional “syncretism” model explains only partially. The conventional model treats Ba'al and Yahweh as originally distinct deities whose attributes merged through cultural contact. Our framework offers a more parsimonious account: *ba'al* was the original Semitic concept of supreme divine authority; Yahweh was a newer divine name applied to the same theological content; and the prophetic tradition's project was to complete the re-labeling by prohibiting the old name and its associated modes of worship while retaining the theological substance—the storm theophany, the sovereignty, the fertility control, the cosmic kingship—intact.

Chapter 15. Conclusions and Directions for Further Research

This paper has presented four independent lines of evidence supporting the hypothesis that Ba'al and Yahweh share a common theological root. The storm-theophany language of Psalm 29, the co-presence of Yahweh, El, and Ba'al at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, the explicit Ba'al-Yahweh conflation in Hosea, and the continuity of bovine divine iconography from the pre-literate bull cult through the golden calf narratives all converge on the same pattern: Yahweh inherited the full theological package of the Ba'al tradition—storm, sovereignty, fertility, cosmic kingship—and the prophetic movement's task was to sever the nominal connection while preserving the content.

Combined with the evidence presented in Part I—that *ba'al* in the earliest Semitic texts functions as a relational noun of supreme possessive authority rather than as a feudal title or a fixed divine name—the implication is that what later tradition calls “Ba'al worship” and what later tradition calls “Yahweh worship” are branches of a single theological inheritance whose common trunk extends into the pre-literate past.

⁷¹Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 2nd ed. (2002).

⁷²Alfonso Archi, “Hadda of Ḫalab and His Temple in the Ebla Period,” *IRAQ* 72 (2010): 3–17.

⁷³Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* (1990).

Further research is needed in several directions. First, a systematic study of the behavioral and characterological attributes of Yahweh in the oldest strata of the Hebrew Bible—particularly moments where Yahweh's actions align more closely with the Ba'al/storm-god profile than with the theological profile developed in later prophetic and wisdom traditions—would test the hypothesis that the earliest literary layers preserve the undifferentiated Ba'al-Yahweh figure. Second, a detailed comparative analysis of Eblaite ritual practices (scapegoat rite, anointed priesthood, itinerant prophets) with biblical cultic legislation would illuminate the degree to which Israelite worship preserves structural features of the pre-differentiation Ba'al tradition. Third, the Abu Salabikh god-list evidence and related Early Dynastic deity catalogues should be subjected to comprehensive analysis to determine the full extent of Ba'al's theonymic attestation in the 3rd millennium BCE.

As stated in Part I, this inquiry concerns the deep historical past and has no implications for the moral standing, legitimacy, or value of any living religious community. The finding that two theological traditions share a common root is a historical observation, not a moral judgment. Whatever emerged from that root over the subsequent millennia—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—evolved through the genuine faith, intellectual labor, and lived experience of billions of people across thousands of years. The root does not determine the fruit.

PART III

The Ba'al Operating System

*Worship Practices, Consecrated Destruction,
and the Pan-Semitic Theological Grammar*

Abstract

Parts I and II of this study established that the Semitic root *b-ʿl* functions as a relational noun of supreme possessive authority in the earliest Semitic texts, and that Yahweh and Ba'al share a common theological root evidenced by convergent storm-theophany language, epigraphic co-presence, prophetic conflation, and iconographic continuity. The present paper (Part III) extends the analysis in two directions. First, we reconstruct the liturgical practices of Ba'al worship as documented in the Ugaritic ritual corpus, the Mari letters, and comparative material, demonstrating that Ba'al cult operated through a contractual vow economy in which divine intervention was activated by precisely specified offerings. Second, we examine *cherem* ("consecrated destruction") as a structural feature of the pan-Semitic sovereignty-deity system, comparing its identical deployment in Moabite (Mesha Stele), Israelite (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Numbers), and Ugaritic contexts. We argue that *cherem* represents the extreme expression of the Ba'al possessor/controller logic—total consecration of a conquered population to the sovereign deity—and that its presence in the earliest Israelite textual layers, using vocabulary cognate with Moabite and operating within identical theological grammar, constitutes a sixth line of evidence for the shared Ba'al-Yahweh root.

Chapter 16. From Theology to Liturgy

Parts I and II of this study examined the semantics of *ba'al* (the relational-authority concept) and the theological convergence between Ba'al and Yahweh (shared storm language, shared cult sites, prophetic conflation, iconographic continuity). Those analyses were primarily semantic and structural. The present paper asks the operational question: what did Ba'al worship look like, and does the liturgical behavior of Ba'al cult match the behavioral profile of Yahweh in the oldest biblical layers?

We focus on two bodies of evidence. The first is the Ugaritic ritual corpus—prescriptive liturgical texts that document calendrical offerings, temple cult maintenance, and an extraordinary siege prayer that explicitly structures Ba'al's intervention as a contractual exchange. The second is the practice of *cherem* ("consecrated destruction"), documented on the Mesha Stele (c. 840 BCE) in Moabite and in the Deuteronomistic literature in Hebrew, which reveals an identical theological grammar governing the relationship between sovereign deity, land, people, and total consecrated annihilation across multiple Semitic traditions.

Chapter 17. Ba'al Worship in the Ugaritic Ritual Corpus

17.1 The Temple Cult: KTU 1.109

The Ugaritic text KTU 1.109 (RS 24.253) preserves a structured festival and sacrificial calendar that locates offerings within “the temple of Ba'al of Ugarit” and distinguishes multiple Ba'al hypostases, including “Ba'al of Ugarit,” “Ba'al of Šapunu (Mount Zaphon),” and “Ba'al of Aleppo.”⁷⁴ The text prescribes a structured ceremonial sequence in which the king (1) washes and purifies himself, (2) sacrifices specified animals at designated locations, (3) performs a temple-maintenance operation described as “illuminating” a room, and (4) offers a dedicated feast for Ba'al of Šapunu consisting of specified animals and a “city-dove.” Additional offerings are directed to Ba'al of Aleppo.⁷⁵

The differentiation of Ba'al into localized hypostases—each receiving distinct offerings within the same liturgical sequence—is structurally significant. It demonstrates that Ba'al functioned not as a single monolithic deity but as a category of divine authority instantiated across cult centers. This pattern is precisely what one would expect from a relational-authority concept (the possessor/controller) that can be indexed to different domains: Ba'al of the mountain, Ba'al of the city, Ba'al of the regional power center. The Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions, discussed in Part II, show the same pattern applied to Yahweh: “Yahweh of Samaria” and “Yahweh of Teman” are localized hypostases of a single deity, structurally identical to “Ba'al of Ugarit” and “Ba'al of Aleppo.”

17.2 The Siege Prayer: KTU 1.119

The most theologically explicit Ba'al ritual text is the siege prayer appended to KTU 1.119 (RS 24.266). During an enemy attack, the community is instructed to “lift their eyes to Ba'al” and request deliverance. The prayer specifies a tightly defined package of vowed cultic performances: consecration of a bull, fulfillment of a vow, consecration of a firstborn, a named offering, a feast, and ascent to the sanctuary.⁷⁶ The text then states the expectation: Ba'al “will hear your prayer” and “will drive” the enemy away.⁷⁷

⁷⁴KTU 1.109 (RS 24.253). Festival and sacrificial calendar including offerings in the temple of Ba'al of Ugarit, feasts for Ba'al of Šapunu, and offerings to Ba'al of Aleppo. See Pardee 2002.

⁷⁵Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002).

⁷⁶KTU 1.119 (RS 24.266), lines 26'–36'. Siege prayer with vow actions. See Pardee 2002.

⁷⁷Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002).

This prayer is decisive for the possessor/controller thesis. It explicitly structures Ba'al's intervention as a contractual exchange: the worshippers perform specified ritual actions, and in return, Ba'al delivers a specified outcome. Ba'al is not praised for his nature, nor worshipped through contemplation. He is contracted for his power. The relationship is transactional—what scholarship terms *do ut des* (“I give so that you may give”). The domains Ba'al controls in this text are precisely those predicted by the Ebla distributional analysis: military security, territorial sovereignty, and the prosperity that depends on both.

The vow of the “firstborn” (*bkr*) within this prayer warrants specific comment. The text uses the verb “sanctify” (*nšqdš*) without specifying the precise nature of the consecration—whether it entails dedication to temple service, animal substitution, or actual sacrifice. While the exact mechanics of firstborn consecration at Ugarit remain debated, the broader Ba'al cultic tradition is deeply associated with the burning of children, whether living or dead, and the preservation of their remains in dedicated sanctuaries. This association is attested in the biblical prophetic literature (Jeremiah 19:5; 32:35), in classical sources describing Carthaginian practices (Diodorus Siculus 20.14), and in the archaeological record of the Phoenician–Punic tophets at Carthage, Motya, and other sites, where urns containing cremated infant remains were recovered alongside votive stelae dedicated to Ba'al Ḥammon.⁷⁸⁷⁹⁸⁰⁸¹⁸² The interpretation of these remains—whether they represent sacrificial victims or a sacred cemetery for naturally deceased infants—is deeply contested among osteologists and archaeologists, and this study takes no position on that question.⁸³ What is not contested is that the tophet votive inscriptions employ the same vow-economy grammar documented at Ugarit: dedications to Ba'al Ḥammon using the formula “a vow that X vowed; indeed he heard his voice; may he bless him”—the identical contractual reciprocity logic of the KTU 1.119 siege prayer, operating across a millennium of Ba'al worship.⁸⁴

⁷⁸Maria Giulia Amadasi Guzzo and José Angel Zamora López, epigraphic synthesis of Phoenician–Punic tophet inscriptions.

⁷⁹Lawrence E. Stager and Joseph A. Greene, “An Odyssey Debate: Were Living Children Sacrificed to the Gods?” *Archaeology Odyssey* 3, no. 6 (2000).

⁸⁰Jeffrey P. Schwartz et al., “Bones, Teeth, and Estimating Age of Perinates: Carthaginian Infant Sacrifice Revisited,” *Antiquity* 86, no. 333 (2012): 738–745.

⁸¹Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 20.14.

⁸²Jeremiah 19:5: “They have built the high places of Ba'al to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Ba'al.” Cf. Jeremiah 32:35; 2 Kings 23:10; Leviticus 18:21.

⁸³Jeffrey P. Schwartz et al., “Bones, Teeth, and Estimating Age of Perinates,” *Antiquity* 86, no. 333 (2012): 738–745.

⁸⁴Maria Giulia Amadasi Guzzo and José Angel Zamora López, epigraphic synthesis of Phoenician–Punic tophet inscriptions.

17.3 The Mari Letters: Storm-God Sovereignty as Portable Power

Two Old Babylonian letters from Mari (18th century BCE) treat the storm god of Aleppo—the same Hadda/Adad whose bull-horn renewal rite is documented at Ebla in the 24th century BCE⁸⁵—as a divine agent whose sovereignty is materially objectified. In the first letter (A.1968), a prophet reports a divine speech: after recounting that the god had allocated “the land” to earlier kings and then reallocated it, the deity declares: “the weapons with which I struck the sea I have given you.”⁸⁶ In the second letter (A.1858), an official reports the arrival of the divine weapons and their deposit “in the temple of Dagan in Terqa.”⁸⁷

The content is structurally homologous with the Ba'al ideology documented at Ugarit: the storm deity controls land allocation and kingship, possesses mythically charged instruments (the weapons that defeated the cosmic sea), and transfers those instruments to human rulers as a legitimization of sovereignty. The administrative handling of these cult objects—their transport, their temple storage, their association with political authority—stages storm-god control as a transferable, temple-anchored power deployed in human governance. This is the possessor/controller concept rendered institutional.

17.4 The Egyptian Evidence: Ba'al-Zaphon as Welfare Controller

A New Kingdom Egyptian stela found at Ugarit (AO 13176, the “Mamy stela”) depicts an Egyptian official worshipping Ba'al-Zaphon and includes an Egyptian offering formula addressed to Ba'al-Zaphon as “great god,” requesting “life, power, health ... every day.”⁸⁸ This demonstrates that Ba'al could be integrated into a formal ritual register that conceptualizes divine agency as allocating welfare, vitality, and protection—the possessor/controller as provider, operating within a standardized offering formula borrowed from Egyptian royal religion.

⁸⁵Alfonso Archi, “Hadda of Ḫalab and His Temple in the Ebla Period,” *IRAQ* 72 (2010): 3–17.

⁸⁶Mari Letter A.1968, lines 1–4'. Prophetic report of divine speech attributed to Adad, Lord of Aleppo. See Jouko Töyräänvuori, appendix reproducing Mari letters A.1968 and A.1858 with translation.

⁸⁷Mari Letter A.1858. Report of the arrival and temple storage of the divine weapons of Adad of Aleppo. See Töyräänvuori.

⁸⁸Eythan Levy, edition and translation of the Baal-Zaphon (“Mamy”) stela (AO 13176), Ugarit.

Chapter 18. Cherem: Consecrated Destruction as the Ba'al Grammar of Total War

18.1 The Mesha Stele (c. 840 BCE)

The Mesha Stele, discovered at Dhiban (ancient Dibon) in Jordan in 1868, preserves a 34-line inscription by King Mesha of Moab commemorating his victories over Israel. The inscription is written in Moabite, a language closely cognate with Hebrew, and its theological grammar is structurally identical to the Deuteronomistic conquest narratives.⁸⁹

Mesha recounts that Chemosh, the sovereign deity of Moab, had been “angry with his land” and allowed Israel to oppress Moab for many years—the same anger/favor cycle that governs Yahweh’s relationship to Israel throughout the Deuteronomistic History. Chemosh then commands Mesha: “Go, take Nebo from Israel.” Mesha attacks by night, fights from dawn to noon, and takes the city. He then records: “I killed everyone: seven thousand men, boys, women, daughters, and pregnant women, because I devoted them to Ashtar-Chemosh.” He subsequently takes “the hearth altars of Yahweh” and drags them before Chemosh.⁹⁰⁹¹

The verb Mesha uses for “devoted to destruction” is the Moabite cognate of Hebrew *herem*. It is the same word, the same grammatical construction, and the same theological logic as the Israelite *cherem* commanded in Deuteronomy 7:1–2 (“you shall utterly destroy them”) and Deuteronomy 20:16–17 (“you shall not leave alive anything that breathes”). The conquered population is not killed as a military expedient; it is killed as a ritual act of consecration to the sovereign deity.⁹²⁹³

18.2 Cherem as the Extreme Vow Economy

The connection between the Ugaritic vow economy and the *cherem* practice becomes clear when both are understood within the possessor/controller framework. In KTU 1.119, the worshippers promise to consecrate the most valuable things they possess—a bull, a firstborn, a feast—in exchange for Ba'al’s military intervention. *Cherem* operates on the same logic at maximum

⁸⁹The Mesha Stele (Moabite Stone), c. 840 BCE. Discovered at Dhiban, Jordan, 1868. Translation: André Lemaire, “Mesha’s Stele and the House of David,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Winter 2022. See also Shmuel Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008).

⁹⁰The Mesha Stele. See Lemaire 2022 and Ahituv 2008.

⁹¹William F. Albright, translation of the Mesha Stele in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 320–321.

⁹²Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁹³Richard D. Nelson, “Hērem and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience,” in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic Literature* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 39–54.

intensity. In a conquest campaign, the most valuable thing the conquering army possesses is the enemy population itself. *Cherem* is the vow economy scaled to totality: the entire conquered population becomes the “bull” offered to the possessor/controller in exchange for the military victory he granted.

This is not metaphor. The Mesha Stele makes the mechanism explicit: Chemosh commands the conquest, Mesha executes it, and the population is “devoted” (“consecrated through destruction”) to the deity as the culminating ritual act. The Deuteronomistic literature describes the same mechanism for Yahweh: Yahweh commands the conquest of Canaan, the Israelites are to execute it, and the Canaanite population is to be devoted to Yahweh through total destruction. The theological grammar is identical. The ritual logic is identical. The vocabulary is cognate. Only the proper noun changes.

18.3 Judges 11:24 — An Israelite Judge Acknowledges the Equivalence

The structural equivalence between Chemosh and Yahweh is not merely an inference drawn by modern scholars. It is explicitly acknowledged within the biblical text itself. In Judges 11:24, the Israelite judge Jephthah, negotiating with the Ammonites over territorial claims, declares: “Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you? Likewise, whatever Yahweh our God has given us, we will possess.”⁹⁴

Jephthah treats Chemosh and Yahweh as structurally equivalent: each deity allocates land to his people, each controls a national domain, each operates as the possessor/controller of a territory. Jephthah is not denouncing Chemosh as a false god. He is recognizing that Chemosh does for Moab precisely what Yahweh does for Israel—the same function, the same theology, the same grammar of divine sovereignty over land. Under the framework of this study, Jephthah is reflecting the pre-reform understanding in which all named sovereignty deities in the Semitic world are regional expressions of the same underlying possessor/controller concept.

Chapter 19. Chronological Priority: The System Before the Names

19.1 Chemosh Before Israel

Chemosh (Kamish) is textually attested at Ebla in the 24th century BCE (c. 2400 BCE), where he possessed a temple, received offerings, appeared in theophoric personal names, and was

⁹⁴Judges 11:24.

embedded in the place name Carchemish.⁹⁵ The earliest extrabiblical attestation of “Israel” as an identifiable entity is the Merneptah Stele from Egypt, dated to approximately 1208 BCE, where Israel is listed with a determinative marking it as a people rather than a territorial state.⁹⁶ The gap is approximately 1,200 years. The Ba'al theological system—including the *cherem* logic, the vow economy, the storm-sovereignty model, and the land-allocation theology—was fully operational and textually documented for over a millennium before Israel existed as a recognizable entity.

19.2 The Composition of the Conquest Narratives

The events described in Numbers and Joshua are set in the late 13th or early 12th century BCE. However, the dominant scholarly consensus places the composition of the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy through Kings) primarily in the 7th century BCE, during or shortly after the reign of King Josiah of Judah (r. 640–609 BCE), with further editing during and after the Babylonian exile.⁹⁷ This means the conquest narratives were written approximately 600 years after the events they claim to describe—and after the Mesha Stele (c. 840 BCE), not before it. The Deuteronomistic authors composed in a world where the *cherem* theological grammar was already a documented, functioning practice among their neighbors.

Archaeological evidence further complicates the historicity of the conquest narratives. The material record does not support a large-scale military conquest of Canaan at the date the biblical narrative requires. Many cities described as conquered by Joshua either did not exist at the time or show no evidence of violent destruction. The archaeological picture instead suggests that the Israelites emerged gradually from within the existing Canaanite population—through settlement, demographic shift, and cultural differentiation—rather than arriving as an external conquering force.⁹⁸

The implication is significant. The conquest narratives are best understood not as historical accounts of unique Yahwistic events but as national origin stories composed within the pre-existing Ba'al theological grammar. The *cherem* concept, the land-allocation theology, the sovereignty deity who commands total destruction as an act of consecration—none of this was invented by the Deuteronomistic authors. It was the theological infrastructure of the entire region, and the authors composed within it because it was the only available language for

⁹⁵Alfonso Archi, “Hadda of Ḫalab and His Temple in the Ebla Period,” *IRAQ* 72 (2010): 3–17.

⁹⁶The Merneptah Stele (c. 1208 BCE), Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

⁹⁷Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

⁹⁸Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

expressing divine sovereignty in the Semitic world. They changed the deity's name from Chemosh or Ba'al to Yahweh. They could not change the grammar.

Chapter 20. The Pan-Semitic Theological Operating System

The cumulative evidence across Parts I, II, and III supports the following synthetic formulation. What later tradition distinguishes as “Ba'al worship,” “Chemosh worship,” and “Yahweh worship” are regional instantiations of a single theological system whose core features can be enumerated:

(1) Sovereign deity as possessor/controller of a territorial domain. The deity owns the land and allocates it to his people. This is documented at Ebla (24th century BCE), in the Mari letters (18th century BCE), on the Mesha Stele (9th century BCE), and in the Deuteronomistic literature (7th century BCE).

(2) Contractual vow economy. The worshipper activates divine intervention through precisely specified offerings—bulls, firstborns, feasts, ascent to the sanctuary—and the deity delivers outcomes (military victory, rain, fertility). Documented in the Ugaritic siege prayer (KTU 1.119), the Punic tophet inscriptions, and structurally present in Israelite sacrificial legislation.

(3) Cherem: total consecration through destruction. The extreme expression of the vow economy. A conquered population is “devoted” to the deity through annihilation as a ritual act of consecration. Documented for Chemosh (Mesha Stele) and Yahweh (Deuteronomy, Joshua) using cognate vocabulary and identical theological logic.

(4) Anger/favor cycle. The deity's anger at his people results in national subjugation by enemies; his favor results in military victory and prosperity. Identical mechanism for Chemosh (Mesha Stele: “Chemosh was angry with his land”) and Yahweh (throughout the Deuteronomistic History).

(5) Direct communication with kings. The deity speaks to rulers, commanding specific military actions. Chemosh tells Mesha: “Go, take Nebo.” Yahweh tells Joshua: “Attack Ai.” The storm god of Aleppo tells the king of Mari: “I have given you the weapons.”

(6) Storm theophany as the signature of divine power. Thunder as voice, lightning as weapon, rain as gift, enthronement over cosmic waters. Documented for Ba'al (Ugaritic Baal Cycle), for the storm god of Aleppo (Mari letters), and for Yahweh (Psalm 29, Psalm 18, Habakkuk 3).

(7) Localized hypostases. The deity manifests under local epithets tied to specific cult centers. Ba'al of Ugarit, Ba'al of Şapunu, Ba'al of Aleppo. Yahweh of Samaria, Yahweh of Teman. The pattern is structurally identical.

These seven features constitute the “operating system” of Semitic sovereignty religion. Every feature attested for Ba'al or Chemosh is also attested for Yahweh in the oldest biblical layers. The names are variables. The system is the constant. And the system is *ba'al*—the relational concept of supreme divine possession and control, documented from its pre-literate roots in the bull cult through its earliest written attestation at Ebla through its full liturgical elaboration at Ugarit and its persistence in the Deuteronomistic literature.

Chapter 21. Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that the liturgical practices of Ba'al worship—the contractual vow economy, the temple-anchored cult, the consecration of valuable life as the price of divine intervention—operate within the same theological grammar as the worship of Yahweh in the oldest Israelite textual layers. The *cherem* practice, documented for Chemosh on the Mesha Stele and for Yahweh in the Deuteronomistic literature using cognate vocabulary and identical theological logic, constitutes the extreme expression of this shared grammar: total consecration of a conquered population to the sovereign deity as a ritual act. Judges 11:24 provides explicit biblical acknowledgment of the structural equivalence between Chemosh and Yahweh as land-allocating sovereignty deities.

The chronological evidence establishes that this theological system predates the Israelites by over a millennium. Chemosh is attested at Ebla in the 24th century BCE; Israel first appears in the extrabiblical record in the late 13th century BCE. The Israelite conquest narratives, composed in the 7th century BCE, deploy a theological grammar that was already ancient—a grammar whose pre-literate roots, as established in Part I, extend to the bull-centered cult of the eastern Mediterranean from the 10th millennium BCE onward.

Across all three parts of this study, six independent lines of evidence converge on a single conclusion: what later tradition separates as “Ba'al,” “Chemosh,” and “Yahweh” are regional instantiations of a single pan-Semitic theological system—a system whose core concept is the supreme possessor/controller, whose earliest written form is the Eblaite *ba'al*, and whose pre-literate roots lie in the bull-centered cult of the ancient Near East. The prophetic revolution that produced exclusive Yahwism was not a break from polytheism into monotheism. It was a re-labeling and modal transformation of the oldest theological tradition in the Semitic world—

retaining the content (sovereignty, storm power, fertility control, cosmic kingship) while prohibiting the old name and its associated modes of worship.

As stated throughout this study, these findings concern the deep historical past and carry no implications for the moral standing, legitimacy, or value of any living religious community. The root does not determine the fruit. What grew from this common trunk over the subsequent millennia evolved through the genuine faith and lived experience of billions of people. This study seeks to illuminate that root, not to judge what emerged from it.

Epilogue: The Implication Stated Plainly

The body of this study has been deliberately restrained in stating its conclusions, preferring to let the evidence speak through convergence rather than declaration. This epilogue names the implication plainly, so that there is no ambiguity about what the evidence points toward.

The earliest recoverable form of Israelite religion—as reconstructed from the oldest poetic strata of the Hebrew Bible, from the archaeological record, from the epigraphic evidence at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, and from the explicit testimony of Hosea—is structurally indistinguishable from the broader Semitic sovereignty-deity tradition that the *ba'al* concept organizes. Every core feature of Israelite Yahwism in its oldest layers—storm theophany, territorial sovereignty, *cherem* warfare, contractual vow economy, prophetic communication with kings, bovine symbolism, localized cult centers—has direct parallels in the documented Ba'al, Chemosh, and Hadad traditions, often using cognate vocabulary and identical theological grammar. The process by which this shared system became Judaism—a distinct, exclusive, eventually monotheistic tradition—was a centuries-long project of re-labeling, modal prohibition, and theological transformation carried out by the prophetic movement and the Deuteronomistic school, primarily in the 8th through 6th centuries BCE.

To state it directly: the evidence compiled in this study supports the conclusion that the earliest Israelite religion was, at a structural level, a regional instantiation of the *ba'al* theological system. What later became Judaism emerged from a transformation of that system—keeping the operating logic, changing the divine name, and progressively prohibiting the old modes of worship (bull iconography, the *ba'al* title, localized manifestations, high-place worship). The Deuteronomistic reform under Josiah, the prophetic interventions from Hosea through Second Isaiah, and the Priestly source's rewriting of covenant theology were successive waves of this transformation. By the Second Temple period, the transformation was essentially complete—the *ba'al* substrate was buried deep enough that most practitioners no longer recognized it. But it remains visible in the oldest textual layers for those who know what to look for.

Several areas of further inquiry arise naturally from this conclusion, though they require dedicated treatment beyond the scope of the present study. Among these, the question of whether additional Israelite cultic practices preserve structural features of the pre-differentiation *ba'al* tradition deserves particular attention. Circumcision, for example, predates Israelite religion by millennia—Egyptian evidence dates the practice to at least 6000 BCE—and its theological framing in the biblical text bears the signature of the possessor/controller system: the most

intimate organ of reproductive fertility is permanently marked as belonging to the sovereign deity through a blood offering, and failure to perform this consecration provokes the deity's lethal response (Exodus 4:24–26, the Zipporah episode). That a fragment of the Phoenician historian Sanchuniathon, preserved by Philo of Byblos, records El—the head of the Canaanite pantheon—circumcising himself or his father Uranos as a cosmogonic act whose blood generated fertility in springs and rivers, situates the practice within the Canaanite divine hierarchy that the present study has connected to the *ba'al* system. Similar questions could be posed of the Passover lamb sacrifice, the anointed priesthood (attested at Ebla fifteen centuries before its biblical description), the scapegoat ritual (whose oldest known form is Eblaite), and the Nazirite vow. Each of these practices warrants investigation as a potential structural inheritance from the pre-differentiation *ba'al* tradition.

A final word on what this study does and does not claim. The finding that early Israelite religion emerged from a transformation of the *ba'al* system does not mean that Judaism is “fake,” “stolen,” or illegitimate. Every living religious tradition has roots that precede and transcend it. Christianity emerged from Judaism. Islam emerged from both. Buddhism emerged from Vedic Hinduism. The fact that a tradition transformed an earlier system does not diminish its subsequent development—it contextualizes it. Judaism as it exists today is the product of millennia of genuine intellectual labor, spiritual experience, ethical reflection, and communal life. None of that is negated by understanding where the root was planted. This study identifies that root. What grew from it belongs to the people who tended it.

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